

Court officials want jobs refilled, services restored

By Kristi Pihl, Herald staff writer

Tri-City superior and juvenile court officials are asking county commissioners to refill positions and restore services that were slashed this year.

Sharon Paradis, bicounty juvenile center administrator, said the budget requests she is making would return juvenile justice to minimum levels.

Franklin County commissioners held budget hearings for the preliminary 2011 budget during the last two weeks, and Benton County commissioners plan similar hearings later this month.

Paradis is asking to restore six positions, including three detention officers, one probation officer, one person for the work crew and one position to coordinate community service.

Those additions would mean the juvenile justice center could return to holding 60 juveniles in detention, instead of the current 35.

There also would be someone to help the youth complete community service requirements, Paradis said. At the moment, community service is being converted into paying fines or spending time in detention because it's difficult for the teens to complete service hours without the staff support.

Paradis said they also hope to return to having 25 openings for juvenile drug court. The court is down to 12 participants because it is being supported only by community donations.

To restore the drug court program to help 25 juveniles and to restore the six other positions would cost \$536,000, which was about what both counties cut from the juvenile court budget this year, Paradis said.

Franklin County's portion would be \$163,000, and Benton County's would be about \$373,000.

In Superior Court, Pat Austin, the court administrator, said they also want the adult drug court -- a 12- to 18-month rehabilitation and education program -- to be able to take 45 people again. That would cost about \$227,525. After state funding and the participant's fees are included, Franklin County's share would be \$48,486, and Benton County's share would be \$129,902, Austin said.

She said drug court helps people become contributing members of society.

"It reunites families and reduces cost to the community," she said.

Superior Court also is requesting that a part-time court commissioner position be changed to full-time.

The court has fewer judicial officers than the state says it should for the court's load, Austin said. The state analysis advises 10 judicial officers, but the bicounty court has 8 1/2-- six judges and 2 1/2 court commissioners -- to hear adult and juvenile Superior Court cases.

Making the part-time commissioner full time would at least bring the court closer to where it should be and help with workload, Austin said.

Superior Court cases get postponed because the court lacks enough judicial officers, she explained.

The court has offset that some by encouraging parties to settle before a trial, Austin said.

The additional commissioner time would cost Franklin County \$19,200 and Benton County \$57,958, she said.

Superior Court's caseload has been steadily increasing, which means the court has more cases to handle with the same staff, Austin said.

"We are trying to do more with less, like everyone else," she said.

Franklin Commission Chairman Brad Peck said the commissioners carefully listened to what Paradis and Austin requested. A final budget won't be determined until December.

Peck said the commissioners started the budget process early in an effort to be thorough.

"The simple reality is that there isn't likely to be the revenue to give everybody everything they want," he said.

Read more: <http://www.tri-cityherald.com/2010/10/08/1201538/court-officials-want-jobs-refilled.html#ixzz124pJH3UZ>